



From heterogeneous worlds: western privilege, class and positionality in the South

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Keywords:	positionality, ethnography, postcolonialism, social class, privilege, research ethics
Abstract:	<p>The aim of this paper is to meet a repeated challenge that comes from within postcolonial writing: to turn postcolonial theory and strategies "inward", and to examine our postcoloniality. Specifically I use social class to interrogate the idea of western privilege in a postcolonial context, examining whether postcolonialism can enable the politics of class to intersect with the politics of 'Otherness' in such a way to open up ethnography to a more ethical geographical praxis. The paper first presents a genealogy of the figure of the privileged western researcher, drawing attention to the historical contingency within subsequent issues of positionality in the South. Taking this figure, the discussion is then guided by two "heteros" of postcolonial writing – heterogeneity and heterotemporality – to disrupt the assumption of historical contingency. I use my own class history as a heterotemporality to insist on a more heterogeneous conceptualisation of western postcoloniality that accounts for the varied experiences of the British working classes. The paper closes with the crucial question of what this largely theoretical work might offer the empirical business of ethnography in (especially) poor areas of the South, asking explicitly: can class, like gender and ethnicity, qualify western privilege in a way that reduces researcher-researched power imbalance? The main argument made is that geography's imperial past is an elite historiography that cannot draw the contours of western researcher relations with postcolonial "Others". Consequently, I propose social class an aspect of subjectivity that moves hyper self-reflexivity towards a more ethical praxis across difference.</p>

From heterogeneous worlds: western privilege, class and positionality in the South

The critical turn in geography brought a healthy, if unresolved, concern to doing ethnographic research in the South, where the South is understood as a “postcolonial context”. Broadly, this came out of an acute awareness of geography’s imperialist past: from initial inquiry in the late 1970s (e.g. Hudson 1977) to more extensive engagement (prominently: Driver 2001; Godlewska and Smith 1994; Livingstone 1992; Pratt 1992), no geographer can be incognisant of, as Jenny Robinson put it, our discipline’s ‘past littered with the skeletons of murderous neglects and encounter’ (2003, 277). Concurrently, feminist perspectives on ethics and the situatedness of knowledge (Haraway 1988; Katz 1992) informed introspection on the relational and personal nature of researcher positionality (England 1994; McDowell 1992; Rose 1997); we and the field are now understood as co-constitutive, our subjectivities and positionalities ever changing against people and place. At the intersection of these literatures - in a debate shaped initially in the pages of *Area* - the “skeletons” of the past bear on considerations of positionality where our contemporary privilege derives from and replicates, or may replicate, colonial-era power relations between researchers and Southern Others (see especially: Madge 1993; Potter 1993; Sidaway 1992). This work has done much for the ambitious and ongoing project towards a de- or post-colonial praxis for geography (McEwan 2003; Robinson 2003; Sidaway 2000) and no geographer should travel South without careful deliberation of what it means to be a “privileged western researcher” in a postcolonial field.

Building on these literatures, the aim of this paper is to meet a repeated challenge that comes from within postcolonial writing: to turn postcolonial theory and strategies “inward” to examine *our* postcoloniality. Specifically I explore what Gayatri Spivak terms ‘hyper self-reflexivity’ to interrogate the idea of western privilege, examining whether postcolonialism can enable the politics of class to intersect with the politics of ‘Otherness’ in such a way to open up ethnography to a more ethical geographical praxis. The politics of class here are understood as less to do with structural Marxism than a cultural

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3 language of ‘deliberate, self-conscious articulation’ that serves individuals and communities as an often
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5 adversarial (though not necessarily antagonistic) descriptor of social difference (Cannadine 1999, 5-11).
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7 The paper thus shares the same critical trajectories of reflection from feminist (Chacko 2004; Sultana
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9 2007) and diaspora (Jazeel 2007; Noxolo 2009) perspectives whose difference from white, male “master
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11 subjects” ‘positions [them] in opposition to dominant discourses and structures of power’
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13 (Visweswaran 1994, 140). Western researchers in these cases insist on complex and variegated relations
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15 with imperial histories, and their positionality in the field is nuanced by different forms and degrees of
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17 privilege. Complementing these interventions, the discussion here is guided at various points by two
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19 “heteros” of postcolonial writing, Spivak’s (1988; 1993) heterogeneity of subjects and Dipesh
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21 Chakrabarty’s (2009) heterotemporalities of historiography, two important themes of postcolonial
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23 writing that offer the opportunity to bring into contact the politics of class with the politics of
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25 ‘Otherness’. Thus, I seek to allow class to interrupt the binding of privilege and western to the end that
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27 research encounters may play out on more ethical ground. The main argument I make is that
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29 geography’s imperial past is an elite historiography that cannot draw the contours of western researcher
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31 relations with postcolonial “Others”. Consequently, I propose social class an aspect of subjectivity that
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33 moves hyper self-reflexivity towards a more ethical praxis across difference.
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38 The paper proceeds in three sections. First I present a genealogy of the figure of the
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40 privileged western researcher, drawing attention to the historical contingency within subsequent issues
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42 of positionality in the South. Second I turn to the ‘subjective picture’ of autobiography to use my own
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44 class history to open ‘a space for subjugated perspectives and voices’ (Roth 2001, 131) as a
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46 heterotemporality to explore a more heterogeneous conceptualisation of western postcoloniality. The
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48 third section reflects on the crucial question of what this largely theoretical work might offer the ethics
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50 of ethnography in (especially) poor areas of the South.
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1. A concise genealogy: geography’s skeletons past and present

Discourse on positionality in postcolonial research centres on the politics of knowledge abstraction and representation. Drawing on postcolonial writers such as Spivak, serious questions are asked in terms of speaking *to*, *for* and *about*. For Spivak the voice of the ‘subaltern’ – or oppressed colonial subject – cannot be recovered without appropriation and even attempts to let ‘the oppressed speak for themselves’ evidences a ‘first world analyst’ ‘masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter’ (1988, 292). Such transparency sweeps away the historical effects that open spaces of encounter and once again transform the South into a ‘resource’, a ‘repository of an ethnographic “cultural difference”’, which draws together intellectual production with western imperialism (1999, 388). Others such as Benita Parry and Ania Loomba have sought to nuance Spivak’s insistence on the impossibility of recovering oppressed voices: Parry warns against ‘deliberate deafness to the native voice where it can be heard’ (1987, 39) and Loomba seeks subaltern testimony that ‘militates against too absolute a theory of subaltern silence’ (2005, 197). Connectedly, yet in a different direction, Qadri Ismail (2005) has written a complex wide-ranging critique of disciplinary emphasis on interpretation from the outside, advocating an ethic of intervention that ‘abides by’ difference while all the time resisting an empirical imperative to generalise singularity. While there is no resolution within these debates (for instance Ismail and Parry are quite distinctly at odds), what unites the different perspectives is a more thoroughgoing examination of the ‘first world analyst’ in the context of the politics of ‘Otherness’.

Social scientists have taken quite seriously these and other theoretical positions, seeking to work them through methodologies of ethnography and writing in the doing of research. Largely this has centred on issues of reflexivity, positionality and identity as sites of more ethical engagement, with the objective of enabling western researchers to write about people in the South without at the same time claiming to speak *for* Others (e.g. Nagar and Ali 2003). Moves towards ‘talking back’ (hooks 1989), ‘being with’ (Probyn 2010) and ‘abiding by’ (Ismail 2005) take different directions that indicate a common belief that subaltern perspectives may not be entirely irretrievable. This does not, however,

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3 provide an affirmative answer to the question “can the subaltern speak?”, rather the large amount of
4 literature investigates the ‘irretrievable’, while holding as axiomatic the ‘heterogeneity’ on which Spivak
5 famously insists (1999, 270).
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10 Against the problematic of retrieving oppressed voices, Spivak, throughout her writing, turns
11 the focus inwards, insisting on interrogation of ‘positionality as investigating subject’. Her, and many
12 others’, concern is that even well intentioned representation displaces testimony and resituates Others
13 within a colonial textuality, amounting to the appropriation of voice and, therefore, a further silencing
14 of the postcolonial subaltern (Spivak 1988; 1993). Spivak calls for ‘hyper self-reflexivity’, cognisant of
15 the privilege of postcolonial scholars in the South from which educational and institutional interests are
16 skewed westwards. In both recognition and defiance of this seeming compromise she insists: ‘rather
17 than continue pathetically to dramatisé victimage or assert a spurious identity, [the postcolonial writer]
18 must say ‘no’ to the ‘moral luck’ of the culture of imperialism while recognising that she must inhabit it,
19 indeed invest it, to criticise it’ (1993, 228). Arif Dirlik takes up this theme in his work, seemingly going a
20 step further in the assertion that academic iterations of postcoloniality do little but ‘cover up the origins
21 of postcolonial intellectuals in a global capitalism of which they are not so much victims as
22 beneficiaries’ (1994, 353). In fact, he goes onto argue (with a touch of irony), ‘postcoloniality is little
23 more than the condition of the intelligentsia of global capitalism’, and presents a similar challenge to
24 that of Spivak in asking whether postcolonial critique, ‘in recognition of its own class-position in global
25 capitalism ... can generate a thoroughgoing criticism of its own ideology and formulate practices of
26 resistance against a system of which it is a product’ (ibid., 356).
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46 Through these foci we get quite a clear sense of heterogeneity to both “researched” and
47 “researchers” in the South. Postcolonial writers have opened critical debate on authorial voices, and
48 those of testimony: experience is beyond ‘capture’, and representation always risks appropriation.
49 Postcolonial Others – the oppressed – and postcolonial critics – the ‘beneficiaries’ (Spivak and Dirlik
50 included) - are thus opened to intense, multi-faceted and unresolved critical attention.
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For western geographers these postcolonial literatures have played an integral role in the effort to de- or post-colonialise the discipline. Travelling South and doing ethnography now means, rightly, engagement with complex (and sometimes contradictory) perspectives on privilege and difference. The concomitant imperative to look on and within ourselves in the West ostensibly deals with an exaggerated form of Spivak’s ‘investigating subject’: with regards to mobilities, institutional prestige, access to publishing avenues and so forth, western geographers are likely more privileged and therefore obliged to contend with the politics of Otherness evermore attentively. In terms of ‘imperial logic’ and ‘positionality as investigating subject’, western researchers have sought to problematise their presence in the postcolonial South through critical histories and reflexive considerations of positionality, two bodies of thought that come together to produce a broadly coherent figure of the “privileged western researcher”.

Critical histories of geography began to take shape in the early 1990s, drawing attention to geographers’ importance to imperialist expansion and domination. Prominently: geographers past are figured as the ‘foot-soldiers’ (Driver 2001) or ‘midwives’ (Bell et al. 1995) of empire, ‘a quintessentially geographical project’ (Godlewska and Smith 1994, 2). In a widely cited passage of *The Geographical Tradition*, David Livingstone characterises geography as ‘the science of imperialism *par excellence*’ whose focus on ‘exploration, topographic and social survey, cartographic representation and regional inventory - the craft practices of the emerging geographical professional - were entirely suited to the colonial project’ (1992, 170). In the field, the ‘craft practices’ of geography became inextricable with the intellectual production of Empire as ‘explorer-conquerors’ travelled and evidenced a world that *needs* or *is open to* European expansion. Subsequent calls came for geography to put its ‘geopolitical house in order’ (Robinson 2003, 65) and reflect seriously on how to post- or de-colonialise the discipline (prominently: McEwan 2003; Raghuram and Madge 2006; Sidaway 2000), recalling always that geography’s intimacy with empire means ‘we ourselves are representatives of this Europe-based tradition’ (Godlewska and Smith 1994, 3).

Aware of this tradition, travelling South involves a sensitivity to what Mary Louise Pratt termed the 'contact zone', where ethnographic meetings play out in 'the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict' (1992, 6). Pratt's historical evocation of the geographer-explorer resonates through much of the literature within the ranging project of postcolonialising geography. James Sidaway refers to 'First World' geographers in the 'Third World' and Cheryl McEwan explicates that 'within the international division of labour most academics are privileged' (2003, 348). Richa Nagar and Frah Ali, in a nuanced and well cited consideration of positionality, contrast a rich heterogeneity to Southern constituents whose contact is with the 'relative privileges' of 'overseas academics' (2003, 358). These important reflections quite rightly emphasise the privilege we enjoy as "western" or "first world" geographers. They recognise our relative wealth, ability to shape knowledge and they emphasise hierarchical relationships with research participants. They ensure we look into ourselves, take our power seriously and realise the relational nature of positionality – while always, of course, resisting – attempting to resist - 'transparent reflexivity' (Rose 1997).

Such reflexivity, premised on uneven North-South privilege, is now a default aspect of geographical reflection on positionality. Tracey Skelton, for instance, points out that 'we are not neutral, scientific observers ... if we work in a postcolonial geographical context, then being white and born in the former colonial country may have an important impact upon the relationships we can establish during our research' (2001, 89). Kathryn Besio similarly notes: 'researchers and colonial travellers share an undeniable lineage, each of us residing somewhere along the coloniser-colonised continuum' (2003, 28). And Paul Cloke and colleagues caution 'geographers ... effectively reproduce the same structural relationship with 'native' peoples as had arisen in the expeditions of the colonial explorer-geographers from earlier centuries: a relationship in which power, influence and assumptions of superiority lie with the white geographers appropriating knowledge, labour and skills from the people of colour in these places' (2004, 14). These literatures frame postcolonial positionality in the context of, on the one hand,

geographical-colonial histories and on the other feminist-influenced understandings of researcher positionality as relative. What results is an imperative to reflexivity that is always shaped an acute awareness of geography's skeletons of empire and how we, as western geographers, might embody colonial histories in our travels South.

2. Working class postcoloniality: not my skeletons?

The imperative for western academics is to think through issues of postcoloniality, to recognise the privilege we carry and to consider our advantageous positions in the context of historical cleavages. While this is a clear and important concern, what remains less clear is the composition of the collectives involved in *our* academic practices and *our* privileges. It seems a homogenising assumption that neglects the complexity of imperialism and the assemblage of postcolonialisms – both *here* and *there* - that are its legacy. As has been argued, postcoloniality (if it is to have any currency at all) cannot only be the condition of southern constituents: 'colonial processes restructured colonial powers too – the memory banks and histories are twinned and interpenetrate' (Sylvester 1999, 712). The question, then, is not just of *our* practices and *our* privileges but of *our postcoloniality*, and if postcolonialism interrogates difference and seeks out disruptive histories then we might, as postcolonial scholars, explore how we may be - if not irretrievably so (though that may well be the case) - heterogeneous within our own privilege. We can then begin a reconsideration of privilege, and rework a relationship with a 'past littered with the skeletons of murderous neglects and encounter'.

The haunting of the skeletons draws contemporary geography alongside historical imperialism, it arouses those skeletons in *our* (contemporary) closet, evoking us as the descendants of European imperialism. The concomitant ethics of positionality rest on a collective responsibility indelibly tied to membership of a community that is reducible to the (European) nation state. As part of a postcolonial geography, movement beyond the nation state – provincialising national narratives - would seem prudent in the examination of collective and individual postcolonialities. At this point the

second “hetero”, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s concept of heterotemporalities, comes to the fore. Proposing that we ‘contemplate the necessarily fragmentary histories of human belonging that never constitute a one or a whole’ (2009, 255), Chakrabarty singles out universities as ‘part of the battery of institutions’ enforcing the ‘truth-games’ of the nation state (2009, 342). While not for a moment wishing to implicate contemporary geographers in the willful complicity in such ‘games’, as long as the dark pasts of empire and historical contingency remain central to our thinking, we cannot claim to have made a committed attempt to provincialise Europe in the processes of knowledge production.

A more committed attempt might take the remnants of the geographer-explorer that produces us as descendants of that tradition and set those remnants against Chakrabarty’s call ‘to write over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship and other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamt-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of ‘tradition’ that ‘modernity’ creates’ (2009, 341-2). Tradition within the modern categories of statehood, therefore, remains a barrier to postcolonialising knowledge production. Or, for the purposes here: the Geographical Tradition coupled with the Euro-American provenance of researchers remains a barrier to postcolonialising knowledge production. These modern categories must be consigned to the provinces of knowledge: ‘so that the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous’ (Chakrabarty 2009, 341). Towards such imaginings, Jenny Robinson has pointed out that ‘a recognition of the diverse cultures of the English working class’ may function to ‘redress the epistemic damage’ of elite histories of empire (2003, 276). Turning the gaze inwards, then, we might look to more variegated histories of Britain that recognise the heterogeneity within and disrupt history as ‘the invention of anachronistic space [in which] the agency of women, the colonised and the industrial working class are disavowed’ (McClintock 2013, 40).

Towards an integration of class into a rethinking of privilege and researcher postcolonial positionality at this point I want to call on class-based heterotemporalities to insist on a heterogeneity to western relations to privilege. Turning to positionality as relational and personal, I wonder at my own relationship with Empire, at what my biography may open ‘a way in which the horizons of

meaning of myself and “subjects” [can] intersect’ (Robinson 1994, 219-220). I’m a working class boy from the Industrial North of England, my parents’ parents and so forth were not mapping Africa. They didn’t study at any of our great public schools or prestigious universities. My maternal lineage left Ireland during the potato famine, when the British Imperial state systematically starved a million people on the neighbouring island. They found work in the cotton mills of the North West - Lancashire - and when that work slowed, my great-great grandfather walked 70 miles across the Pennines to find work in the coal mines of South Yorkshire. He brought his family to Rotherham and eventually his grandson, my grandfather, would work in the steelworks of Sheffield. My paternal lineage begins in the coal seams of South Wales, eventually migrating to the shipyards of Lanarkshire in Scotland and then south again to the coal fields of North Nottinghamshire where I was born. What of my historical contingency in terms of empire? My forebears didn’t order the passage of knowledge from Africa and the Orient to Kensington Gore and Oxbridge; my historical relationship with imperialism is one of fuelling and building empire in a different way: mining coal, working the mills, building the ships, losing and finding work according to the investments and divestments of the elite – at most, ‘going along with’ rather than directing the projection of power overseas (Cannadine 2002). Imperialism was not and is not a project of the working classes, whatever my privilege, it’s not of the same order as that of the elites: geography’s skeletons are not mine.

3. Conclusions: theoretical and empirical implications for positionality

But that’s too emphatic an assertion. Of course my (our) postcoloniality, my (our) privilege, derives from the spoils of empire. British university degrees would not carry – still now – the same opportunities without empire, this much is obvious, and my education and work affords great privilege. Here the work of Diane Reay speaks really clearly, she writes of the ‘double bind’ of the working-class academic: the ‘difficulty of reconciling socialisation into academic culture with a subjectivity that draws powerfully on working class identity’ (1997, 19). Writing so personally of her positionality, Reay

continues: 'we worked so hard at school not primarily to be acceptable to the middle classes, who were always the enemy, but to redeem our parents, to prove our family was 'just as good'' (ibid., 23). From this perspective, to accept historical contingency with an elite Geographical Tradition is to consent to being accepted by the middle classes, a process, Reay writes powerfully, 'of treachery and accidence to institutionalised and socially endemic inequalities the middle class label holds' (ibid., 26). This cultural language of class as an assertion of social difference (Cannadine 1999), can here be set in dialogue with Chakrabarty's critique of universities 'complicit' in the reproduction of elite historiographies: both are invested in a deconstruction of academia as an elite pursuit. Theoretically, then, just as the positionality of western researchers is not fixed by masculinity (Chacko 2004; Sultana 2007) or whiteness (Jazeel 2007; Noxolo 2009), nor is it fixed by social class.

The question remains of how this translates to geographical praxis on the ground. In the cases of gender and ethnicity, the theoretical work of fragmenting of histories is augmented by a quite obvious empirical potential for more equitable ethnographic exchanges. It is perhaps not so clear-cut when it comes to class; I am a white, British male; the way I am perceived by participants in the south may not be inflected by British working-class culture. But in light of thoroughgoing postcolonial critiques of 'disinterested interpretation' and moves towards 'abiding by' Others (Ismail 2005), the sense of unfairness that is part of growing up in the margins can also become a resource (Reay 1997). To illustrate what such a resource can bring to the ethics of ethnography, I close with a vignette that moves from the metropole to the periphery and in doing so indicates one way that the politics of social class intersect with the politics of 'Otherness' in such a way to open up ethnography to a more ethical geographical praxis.

During my postgraduate studies in literature at University College London, the DH Lawrence Seminar focused on *Women in Love*, a text in which when unwashed people speak, they do so in (Lawrence's stylised version of) a North Nottinghamshire dialect. It is a textual representation of the broad vowels and glottal stops that I grew up with, but had worked (mostly subconsciously) to suppress. On this day though the professor was onto me: "aren't you from the North, would you just

read this out so *we* can imagine how it sounds?”. With a regional accent, and no Oxbridge degree, I was already marked out; I read aloud, from outside in. Later I read Janet Zandy: ‘oral language ... is a giveaway class identity marker. A middle-class child goes from the language of home to the language of school without disruption. She does not have to hesitate, relearn, or adapt because she does not need to switch linguistic codes. Working-class children ... will not be able to move from the language of home to the language of school without disruption ... [in this way] language can be a weapon to demolish and oppress’ (1995, 5). I wasn’t demolished but, and though this may seem precious, I was othered. Later still, during my PhD work in Karnataka, Southern India, I interviewed a group of young development workers. While the first three interviewees (all male) were eager to answer my questions, the fourth, as she stumbled over some English words, became visibly embarrassed. The men were showing off, making their education count. It’s a small thing, but my immediate switching of the interview into Kannada (a language I don’t understand) helped to reduce her discomfort; insisting that all responses avoid English reduced the power imbalance between not only researcher-researched, but also between the four participants.

It was nothing, or it was a small thing, and there is no doubt a danger of self-satisfaction in a somewhat too-easy passage from elite institution to periphery, but it’s a chance worth taking. Perhaps this is where shared pasts is a key, and perhaps controversial idea: might the British working classes have a history more contingent with southern Others than with the elites whose part in imperialism was always more than ‘going along with’? In response, we should certainly recall that ‘both white and dark-skinned people of empire were seen as superior; or, alternatively, as inferior’ (Cannadine 2002, 124) – that, to British Imperialists, East End dock workers, say, were little different to Indian peasants. Ethnographic research with often underprivileged Others in the postcolonial south from here can benefit from having first-hand knowledge of unfair historical legacies, albeit not to the same degree, but something of the same quality, where paths are never quite as smooth and opportunities appear that bit further in the distance. The privilege of a working class researcher working in the postcolonial south is significant, and her experience cannot be likened to that of oppressed colonial subjects, but it can be

drawn on for its contingencies. To abide by Otherness, Ismail writes, is ‘not comprehension or interpretation but involvement, getting one’s hands dirty, taking the risk of being interventionary’ (2005, xxix). Intervention in this sense is to show interest, to speak to, rather than *for* and moves on from feminist notions of ‘being with’ (Probyn 2010) by recognising the inseparability of research praxis and politics: ‘taking sides ... on ethical and political grounds’ (Ismail 2005, xxxix). It is here that postcolonialism can enable the politics of class to intersect with the politics of ‘Otherness’ towards a more ethical geographic praxis: in the business of talking about the unfairness of unequal opportunities, of assigned societal positions and trajectories, to know what it is to be sometimes outside, a working class background (finally) becomes an academic resource that may just make abiding by come that bit more naturally. If something of this is true, then entering the South as a hyper self-reflexive, working-class researcher can make for more ethical relations with Southern research participants.

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